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CPYRGHT The Unseen Influence

The Central Intelligence Agency is supposed to be the omniscient undercover force of government. Official Washington doesn't publicly recognize its actions, but it does openly appropriate a big amount each year to support it.

The average American accepts the CIA's secret operations in good faith, with no choice but to believe that the cloak and dagger agents are accomplishing much more than shows on the surface. However, in recent months, a number of events have shaken that confidence.

This week an excellent NBC televised show summed up the thousands of stories filed on Cuba and graphically read the record on the CIA in the Caribbean adventure. It was not a flattering picture. A pitiful force of Cuban refugees walked into the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs largely because we were so misinformed by CIA intelligence.

A blunder here and there may be understandable, but the Cuban blackeye does not stand alone. Add to this the ineffective coups in South Viet Nam, the backing of an unpopular and hopeless general in Laos, and more recently, the Panamanian uprisings that took the U. S. by surprise.

Yet, CIA seems to remain inviolable. Efforts to curb its extraordinary influence at the highest levels of government and to reform its frighteningly free-wheeling operations around the world get nowhere.

Allen Dulles, the former CIA director, boasted a few years back that the CIA "has a more influential position in our government than intelligence enjoys in any other in the world." To judge by the recent operations, it is apparent that this undue influence continues unabated.

There is no question that we need a strong, coordinated agency to gather and interpret facts necessary to our national security for the President and those of his highest aides who must make and execute policy. There is a question, however, as to whether the CIA now is performing this primary role efficiently and well.

It's time we had more intelligence on how deeply we're committed to the CIA. It is time, too, to ask openly whether the intelligence agency has gone beyond its proper role into the incompatible field of formulating and carrying out policy.

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